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Ramón García, Featured Poet: Brother Bluebeard and Other Poems

Naomi Ruth Lowinsky

In this commentary on the "Brother Bluebeard" sequence by featured poet Ramón García, I consider the profound and terrible revelations this mythic poem gives about our own dreaded times, as well as the wisdom it brings us, patterned on the archetype of initiation—descent into an underworld. In his gender-fluid retelling of the Bluebeard legend, the narrator of the poem is a man who sleeps with men, but who over the course of the poem identifies with the women whom Bluebeard has slaughtered. This is at once a highly political sequence of poems, in which we can recognize the Bluebeard in our current national story, a Jungian series of poems that illuminates the alchemical process of *mortificatio* and rebirth, and a story of trauma and spiritual recovery.

My time under the sign of your bitterness
Star of stage-managed directions,
Firmament of feminine death.

—Ramón García, "Conversion"

What World Are We in?
The religion of feelings and tears
had never touched him.
He did not tolerate ghosts of any kind.
—"Brother Bluebeard"

Some poems are like big dreams, revealing the cultural unconscious of a people—those shadowy depths where the restless dead tell their forgotten stories and practice mysterious rites in order to shape our collective psyche. Like a big dream, a poem like that can spark new consciousness; one can reflect on it for a long time, and keep finding new angles for insight and difficult truths. The "Brother Bluebeard" sequence is such a work, profound and terrible, striking a strong resonance in our dreaded times. Ramón García brings a fertile mythic imagination, a gift for the clairvoyant image and the soothsaying phrase, to his provocative composition.

The opening lines of the long poem, "Brother Bluebeard," usher us into the realm of one who is a "Secret lover of mirrors,/Narcissus he had let drown." There is so much to unpack here. What kind of narcissist keeps his love of mirrors a secret? What kind of narcissist lets himself drown? This is a conflicted character, one who is not truthful with himself or others. We learn that he is engaged in the "empty/False magic of

power." Though this Bluebeard is addicted to mirrors, power over others is what really drives him. Bluebeard's castle itself is "in the throes of the music he composed." A castle in throes? This magician seems to control the atmosphere through music, rather like a poet might—for example, García, who uses internal rhyming, seductive rhythms, and wordplay to cast a musical spell on the reader. We are at once entranced and filled with foreboding.

In her wonderful amplification of the Bluebeard tale in *Women Who Run with the Wolves* (Pinkola, 1992), Clarissa Pinkola Estés tells us that Bluebeard is a "failed magician" (p. 40). She goes on to write:

> In folklore there are any number of sorcerer's apprentices who foolishly dared to venture beyond their actual skill levels .... [They] desire superiority and power over others. They carry a kind of psychological inflation wherein ... [they wish] to be loftier than, as big as, and equal to the Ineffable .... (p. 45)

They are punished by losing their "ability in the worlds of mystery and magic ... or [by] lonely exile from the land of the Gods ..." (p. 45). For Pinkola Estés, Bluebeard "represents a deeply reclusive complex which lurks at the edge of all women's lives ..." (p. 44), a murderous inner or outer predator who sets out to destroy a woman's wildness, her spirit, and her creativity.

In García's version we get a fascinating twist. García's sequence of poems moves us beyond the age-old binary of male versus female to something more complicated and compelling. The poem's narrator is a man who sleeps with men. He is the third, making a gender triangle in which he bridges the realms of male and female. He has been seduced into Bluebeard's castle by the magician's power and magnetism. Early in the poem his host complains to him about

> those insufferable women
> Who wanted to know too much.
> I thought they had nothing to do with me;
> Being a man ...

This predatory narcissist is not the only conflicted character in the drama. The narrator is conflicted as well. Is he with the men or with the women? He lets us know his ambivalent attitude about the women with the words "I thought," which forewarn that his attitude will change. In the very next line he confesses that he is a "Co-conspirator, partner in crime." Our sense of foreboding deepens when he admits that he didn't realize that

> this was the path
> To the darkest recesses of the castle,
> From which those women
> Had never returned.

He knows and he doesn't know his own culpability as well as his own vulnerability. He is a sucker for Bluebeard's seduction: "You are like me," meaning, not like "those insufferable women," not like those "frivolous" other men. He is spellbound by the "false magic of power," used as a mirror by the demanding master of the castle. Like the poem's narrator, we are pulled into "the rage of his withholding, his caginess,/The disarming invitations of his challenges ...." This is no everyday passion. This is an intellectual love affair far above the realm of dead women:

> Even as my sisters hung like pheasants below the floors
> Where we dined, fucked and read Borges and Baudelaire

I refused to hear the slow, steady dripping of their blood.
It was the music of my future.

This chilling image is where the poem turns, where the narrator begins to confront his own abasement. What world are we in? What terrible dream? What does García's poem tell us about ourselves? If you've ever had a bad boyfriend, you know this Bluebeard—his withholding, his caginess, how bereft of feeling he is, how he refuses to tolerate ghosts. He is a killer, power hungry, controlling. In his grip one belongs to the dead, though it will take a crisis to wake up to that awful reality. If you've ever had a bad dream in which you are pursued by a merciless assassin, chased down dark alleys, about to be assaulted, you know this Bluebeard. You will have to stop running, turn around and face him, in order to see that he is an aspect of you.

If ever, in waking life, you've been stalked, molested, or worse by a man without feeling or the capacity for grief, you know this Bluebeard. You will have to tell your story aloud, to your analyst, your therapist, your friends, to the culture, in order not to collude with his evil. If you've ever felt trapped in our collective political nightmare by the current con man in the White House, that failed magician seeking power over us all, he who manipulates mirrors, he whose secret depths are filled with "tortures, humiliations, derangements,/Shining like … hoarded jewels …," you know this Bluebeard. If you are like me and those I am close to, you see and hear him everywhere. Just the other day, listening to the PBS News Hour, I heard David Brooks say, "We can't let him control our minds." He was speaking of the American president. What world are we in? What terrible dream? We need to ask, with Estés: "But what shall we do with those … who carry out destruction without thought?" (p. 39).

Mortificatio
The trackless cold pinnacles of sexual flesh opened upon
The Secret dead:
Corpses like letters spelling his true name.
"Brother Bluebeard"

In an email exchange, I asked García how he came to write a poem about Bluebeard. He responded:

> Although in my formal education I was exposed primarily to Freud and Lacan and their contemporary theorists, as a poet I am more drawn to Jung's treatment of poetry, myth, and spiritual matters. In my two published books *Other Countries* and *The Chronicles*, I rewrite some of the Brothers Grimm classic fairy tales, and although I was interested in the Bluebeard tale, it seemed impenetrable to me; I had difficulty entering it. The tale's sadism and misogyny were inexplicable to me, until I began to understand it as a story about the patriarchal shadow in relationships and the history of colonized peoples. In other words, I began to enter the Bluebeard story as I came to comprehend it as representative of my own psychological complexes and the inherited trauma originating in genocide and colonization. Then I knew I could transform the Bluebeard myth into a story of resistance and healing, of spiritual recovery. Interestingly, after I completed the Bluebeard poems, the Harvey Weinstein scandal broke out, and I could see it mirrored in the poems. Bluebeard is an archetype of patriarchal power, the shadow of abuse and the denial of what is evident. In exposing and coming to terms with the shadow, then the complicity and the destruction of sexual minorities and women can

be overcome. This is my hope, as we see the shadow of North America's racial history rear its irrational head in the Trump administration and the unhealed sectors of North American society.

Has García "transformed the Bluebeard myth into a story of resistance and healing, of spiritual recovery?" "Brother Bluebeard and Other Poems" are not an easy read. The poems demand much of the reader: stamina, the courage to look at horror, the patience to let them reveal their mysteries in their own time. But as I've read and reread them, wandered about in their intricate mazes, I have found the sequence full of wisdom, patterned by the archetype of initiation that Jungian psychology describes—the descent into an underworld, the work with shadow and nightmare, the terrible recognition that one belongs "to the dead," that one is in a state of mortification, where even one's seducer is a dead man. In a compelling shift of viewpoint, the narrator speaks to his captor:

Oh brotherhood of one, brother Bluebeard,
Those men you didn't have to murder because they
didn't aim to understand.
In the faceless sex you had with them …
They annihilate you.

If you use your lover as a mirror, you are indeed participating in a brotherhood of one. But the narrator goes much further. He sees Bluebeard's vulnerability and loneliness. He has killed his female brides because they are curious and want to know too much. But his male lovers, who don't "aim to understand," turn the tables on him; with "every ecstatic shared breath/They kill every trace of you." Unlike our narrator and the brides, these men are not seekers of consciousness. This is one of the many ways in which our narrator chooses to ally with the women. We are witness to his slow realization that he has participated in "the collusion of the conquered,/A looking the other way, like a bystander …" ("Conversion"). Mysteriously, in the act of recognizing oneself "looking the other way," the awful truth can free us. How does this happen?

In Estés' telling of the tale, the youngest sister who married Bluebeard breaks his taboo and uses the smallest key to open the forbidden door, where she sees the horror: the many skeletons of his victims. The key begins bleeding, her dress bleeds, she cannot stop the bleeding. Estés writes: "Once we have seen the shocking truth of the killing room, we can no longer pretend it does not exist" (p. 55). Consciousness of the terrible truth is the beginning of our way out of Bluebeard's castle. And Estés advises that "asking the proper question is the central action of transformation. The key question causes germination of consciousness" (p. 52).

The first key question in Garcia's poem opens section V:

I had dreams that I was fucking women.
Did his dead haunt my dreams?

The narrator is beginning to see his own role in "the shocking truth of the killing room." He is beginning to understand that he is being haunted by "the secret dead." In his dreams he is the one "fucking women" with all the negative resonance of the *f*-word. But he doesn't realize that he too has "surrendered" …

Until I felt my blood course through his voice.
The cold winds of truth entered the castle

Where I had become prisoner—voided, doubled,
His echo of myself.
The spell was broken …

He finally recognizes that he has not only been betrayed, but has betrayed himself. He asks the second question at the end of "Brother Bluebeard," with the hindsight of distance: "How did his *Peer Gynt* seductions succeed?/Terror and tenderness, what was it that entrapped me?"

This question is addressed in the short poem "Conversion," which follows. The narrator recognizes that he had acquiesced "to the religion of romance,/The theology of trust," and in so doing, colluded, looked the other way, while Bluebeard "counted and calculated" the "Firmament of feminine death." In this poem he addresses Bluebeard directly, not by name, but as "you," a confrontation that allows him to address the larger political truths portrayed in the poem "Conquistador," in which we learn that Bluebeard was a "seducer of Russian brides, Chinese brides, Philipino brides." The title of the poem broadens the field of victimization. We are not dealing only with the feminine as victim, but with colonization and its victims—a long, terrible history of trauma that lives on in all those peoples it touched. Yet, it is in this poem that the brides begin to stir. They begin to have agency: "The brides were never annihilated./They called you home."

Bride Brotherhood
Plagued by alienation and doubt,
I didn't realize we, bride brotherhood,
The murdered and the living,
Shared the key
"Revolution"

Soon enough the dead brides are running things. They, "Mistresses of nerves, feminine, determined" haunt the narrator, shackle him:

to wanting,
Singing of inescapable longing
In suppressed, forgotten languages.
"Survivor's Guilt"

This beautiful passage reframes the familiar image of Odysseus tying himself to the mast to keep from responding to the Sirens' calls, as a deep longing in the psyche of a man opens to the feminine, for what has been so long suppressed. He has become part of the "bride brotherhood," the gender-fluid community of the "murdered and the living," who are engaged in the work of what García calls "spiritual recovery." The narrator sums up the whole terrible story from which we are trying to recover in the second stanza of "Displacement":

Oh Judas, Iago,
Bluebeard's bloodline
has not stopped its mad course
through the prisons of cities, destroyed minds
and our bodies.

Blood is an ongoing theme in these poems, dripping to announce the terrible secret of the dead "sisters," coursing through Bluebeard's voice as the narrator begins to understand what has happened to him, and emerging in this next-to-last poem as

"Bluebeard's bloodline," the terrible toxic lineage that contaminates our world. Estés writes:

> The blood in this story is not menstrual blood, but arterial blood from the soul. It not only stains the key, it runs down the entire persona … . When the weeping key—the crying question—stains our personas, we cannot any longer hide our travails … . Seeing the truth causes us to bleed energy even more. It is painful; it is artery cutting … (pp. 55–56)

I was often struck in working on this poetic sequence with the reverberations between García's telling and that of Estés. I wondered if he had read her. He responded:

> It was only after I finished most of the Bluebeard poems that I researched work on the Bluebeard tale and Bartok's opera *Bluebeard's Castle*. Interesting that you mention Clarissa Pinkola Estés' book. I reread the chapter on Bluebeard recently, just to refresh my understanding of it. I could definitely see parallel ideas in my poems and Pinkola Esté's take on the Bluebeard myth, especially in terms of feminism and the overcoming of the murderous patriarchal figure. *Women Who Run with the Wolves* is one of the most lucid and interesting takes on the Bluebeard tale that I read.

Here we have an example of the deep rivers of the collective unconscious, channeled by two very different writers in two very different times. Estés book was published in 1992, over twenty-five years go. García comments on the tale's continuing relevance:

> The story of Bluebeard remains for me a mysterious narrative with aspects that perhaps will always remain indecipherable. And because we live in a deeply unjust world, where violence against women and the most oppressed remains unresolved—I am thinking of the femicide in Juarez and the displacement of Palestinians, in particular—unfortunately, Bluebeard is perhaps the folk tale/fairy tale that speaks to the most difficult personal and political problems today.

Some poems serve a healing function, and this sequence belongs to those. I was aware as I spent time in the world García has created, that my relationship to the narrator was in constant flux, and through that flux I could feel my soul touched and my view of the world transformed as my relationship to him changed. Early on in the poem the narrator tells us: "I wanted so much to open up to experience." I warmed to this earnest and naïve young man, who reminded me of myself as a young woman. By the next stanza he has become a man divided against himself, as he recognizes that he is a "partner in crime." Yet I'm still with him. In hindsight we can all see how foolish we once were. That is part of gaining experience. But by the end of section IV, when he reveals,

> The trackless cold pinnacles of sex opened upon
> The secret dead:
> Corpses like letters spelling his true name,

he has lost my allegiance. He has seen the terrible truth and yet continues his affair with a murderer. I could feel myself casting him out as an evil one. He lured me back in section V with that soulful revelation about his dreams of "fucking women." The murdered feminine is speaking to him in dreams and in his own experience: "My body was not enough. He also ransacked my soul." Again, I am with him, moved that a man

could take responsibility for his role in his own disturbing dreams, that he could know himself both as perpetrator and victim of such devastating experiences, familiar to most women. When we get to Section VII, and the narrator confesses,

> I thought cum was a clandestine potion, an amulet,
> That would bring security,

I'm ready to invite him to my consciousness-raising group and to call him "sister." Many a woman can tell stories about her own youthful naïve belief that she could trade in her sexuality for security; many a woman has learned the price of selling herself for the sake of safety. As the narrator faces the awful truth about himself, feels his own blood course through Bluebeard's voice, as though his essence has been eaten alive, the spell is broken. Clarity comes in simple language: "I knew I had been betrayed." So down to earth, so plain-spoken comes this insight that, though painful, is also grounding and relieving. By the end of the "Brother Bluebeard" poem I am the narrator's bride brother, and he is my sister. With the narrator I have suffered the confusions and delusions of being the predator's prey in the patriarchy. I have clarified my solidarity with others who are oppressed.

By the last section of "Brother Bluebeard" we are "a plane ride away" from all the horror. "Distance is grace." My feelings have shifted again. I feel tenderly toward this narrator, see in his sadder but wiser story of death and rebirth the outlines of an initiation with which I can identify. The narrative power of "Brother Bluebeard" leaves us with a last poignant stanza:

> Vain explorer, his witness, his survivor
> I inherited the memory of the dead
> Who populate the unmarked graves of love.

Was the narrator vain because he thought too well of himself, or because he gained nothing from his explorations? He has survived, he has won the struggle, but there is no inflation, no glory in his words. His inheritance, however, is significant, and it shifts the story because the dead have a great deal to say. This sets us up for the subtle and taut way in which the short poems respond to the "proper question": "What was it that entrapped me?" I am full of admiration for this narrator who has regained his strength, can confront the ghost of Bluebeard by speaking to him in the second person, and look back with clear eyes at "my time under the sign of your bitterness."

García's poems do not give us details of Bluebeard's end. Estés tells us that his young wife, knowing he is about to kill her, calls upon her brothers to fight for her. They "represent the blessing of strength and action" (p. 62). They are a manifestation, according to Estés, of a woman's positive animus, strong enough to kill off the predator and "leave what is left of him for the carrion eaters" (p. 62). I bring up this part of the story because I think her wisdom is helpful to us in our current political moment. She writes: "In a culture where the predator rules, all new life needing to be born, all old life needing to be gone, is unable to move and the soul-lives of its citizenry are frozen, with both fear and spiritual famine" (p. 68). Of Bluebeard's end, she writes:

> In the finale of the Bluebeard story his bones and gristle are left for the buzzards. This gives us a strong insight into transformation of the predator. This is the last task for a woman in this Bluebeardian journey: to allow her Life/Death/Life nature to pick the predator apart and carry it off to be incubated, transformed, released back in to life. (p. 64)

> The predator's rage can be rendered into a soul-fire for accomplishing a great task in the world. The predator's craftiness can be used to inspect and understand things from a distance. The predator's killing nature can be used to kill off what must properly die in a woman's life … (p. 65)

García's poetic sequence also speaks to the life cycle and to the re-energizing of the feminine in the wake of Bluebeard's demise. Hope shows up in the last poem "Revolution." Instead of the bride's brothers coming to the rescue, García's version brings us a new kind of *coniunctio*: the "bride brotherhood" that has been formed by rousing the dead feminine to phallic power in partnership with the feminine in men. The symbolic meaning of the third comes in the form of the "displaced children," the children of this union. As a woman who came to consciousness and to poetry in the midst of the second wave of feminism and the first wave of the goddess redux, it is great news that

> That last, forbidden room
> Was always ours.
> Our displaced children
> Will storm his castle
> And it will be theirs.

While working with this imagery, I suddenly remembered the presenting dream in my first analysis, almost fifty years ago: *The fortress, or castle, in which I live has been blown down by a great wind or knocked over by an earthquake. I no longer know where my home is.* The dream says that the patriarchal fortress or castle, in which I've been trapped, has been knocked down by archetypal forces. This happened to many women during those years. But then, soon after, it seemed we lost track of our liberated selves. In recent years, LGBTQ rights have come into focus in the culture. Old homophobic structures have been knocked down. And a painful consciousness of our systemic racism and misogyny has emerged at the same time as we feel horrified and controlled by that Bluebeard in the White House. García has found a way of bringing us back into the struggle we were in fifty years ago, bringing it to life in a new, more gender-fluid configuration. I consider it a central function of political poetry not only to witness evil, to wrestle with the devil, but to speak for the dead whose lives have been ransacked, as well as to transform consciousness. This is the true magic of this remarkable poetic sequence. What he has achieved seems to me well described by Estés:

> To take the world into one's arms and to act toward it in a soul-filled and soul-strengthening manner is a powerful act of wildish spirit. (p. 69)

Naomi Ruth Lowinsky, Ph.D., is an analyst member of the San Francisco C. G. Jung Institute, a frequent contributor to and poetry editor of Psychological Perspectives, *and a widely published poet. Lowinsky's fourth poetry collection is* The Faust Woman Poems. *Her chapbook*, The Little House on Stilts Remembers, *won the Blue Light Poetry Prize. Her new book of essays is* The Rabbi, the Goddess and Jung: Getting the Word from Within.

FURTHER READING

Estés, C. P. (1992). *Women who run with the wolves*. New York: Ballantine Books.